

By Cdr. Mark Darrah

As I began the training track for my squadron XO-CO tour, I felt my aviation experience would hold up well to the challenges ahead. I had completed sea tours as a JO, FRS instructor, super JO, and department head, gathering experiences as an officer and an aviator in billets designed to prepare me for aviation command. I knew how critical safety would be to a successful command tour, and I felt prepared to deal with any situation. How wrong could I be?

I found out just after I took command of the squadron, shortly before a major training detachment. The excitement of the moment overshadowed attention I should have given to how we were doing in the safety business. My sense was that we had a solid program and everyone understood my desire to continue improving it. But things happen in tactical aviation that are hard to foresee. I first realized this when we had to make a section, high-speed abort.

The **Adventure** Was Over



EA-6B photo by AN Stan Parker
Photo-composite by Patricia Eaton

One day, our section was scheduled to depart home base, proceed to the local MOA, join on a KC-135, MARSA with four different squadrons, day tank, detach then conduct HARM training. We then would then rejoin on the KC-135 for night tanking and depart the area as a section for multiple, night approaches at home base. To make it more exciting, our nugget pilot was scheduled as the event's wingman. The weather was excellent, and everyone was comfortable with the brief and expectations. ATIS reported the bird-hazard condition as "green."

We took the runway, and the lead pilot ran up the section. Sitting in the back left seat, I could not see our wingman, but that was about to change quickly. My pilot called, "Both engines good, no lights, off the peg, 80 knots, off nose-wheel steering, high speed, everything is looking good...aww \$#*&! Bird!" His expletive at the end of the list was one of the things you never want to hear from junior pilots (the others are, "Hey, watch this!", "I didn't know that switch worked like that," and "Cool, if you close your eyes, it doesn't feel like we're moving").

The front-seat ECMO called, "What?", because he had his eye on Dash 2.

The pilot said, "\$#*&, it's an eagle! Aborting!" Time compression immediately kicked in. I looked at the airspeed indicator when the abort was called and saw we were right at maximum abort speed and below maximum brake speed as the throttles went to idle. In my peripheral vision, I saw a large, dark object pass extremely close to the canopy. In fact, after things settled down, I realized I had seen every detail of the eagle as it passed over me.

It registered in my mind that our wingman was still in my vision to the right, which shouldn't be possible since we were aborting. We had briefed there would be no sympathetic aborts for the section. At that instant, I heard several voices on our base frequency saying, "Continue, continue, continue!" My mind was racing: Who was calling continue, why was I hearing it on base frequency, why was he still there, and had


we actually hit the bird? Our wingman disappeared quickly as he went to MRT and accelerated.

It was my turn to say something. "Did he get off?" I asked. "Is he airborne?" The positive response by ECMO-1 eased my concern for Dash 2, but our own situation remained questionable;

In my peripheral vision, I saw a large, dark object pass extremely close to the canopy.

we did not have much runway left, and we still were moving along at a high speed. As if on cue, our pilot said he had the aircraft under control, and I felt the brakes begin to take hold. As we cleared the runway, I realized the entire event started and ended in a matter of seconds. The front-seat crew discussed our options, and they were certain we had not hit the bird. The only uncertainty that remained was the status of our brakes after the high-speed abort.

As we stopped at the entrance to the line for our hot-brake checks, our plane captain pointed to our left mainmount. Our left, main-fuse plugs had melted and the tire had deflated. Our adventure was over. We shut down and walked to maintenance.

Real-world lessons are the best training. In this case, we made decisions based on NATOPS. We managed the risks to minimize emergencies. We were able to act when unexpected, unbriefed, and nonstandard events occurred. 

Cdr. Darrah is the commanding officer of VAQ-142.